

The First Testament and the Commonwealth of God
Committee on Ministry, Presbytery of Ohio Valley

Isaiah 1:21-31
II Timothy 3:16-17

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August 28, 2010

I've titled my message a "sermily" because it's something between a sermon and a homily. That doesn't mean it's going to be short. It just means it may not seem quite as preachy as a sermon, or quite as cozy as a homily. Then again, it may be more or less of both than any of us suspects.

Our text from II Timothy says, "All scripture is inspired of God and is useful – *useful* – for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." But a footnote in my NRSV says that there is an alternative, and equally possible, rendering: "Every scripture inspired by God is also useful . . ." As if there may be some scriptures that are not necessarily inspired by God.

We have before us a very much abused text. It says a lot less than many people want it to say. Nothing about inerrancy or infallibility. Not even a clear claim that all scripture is inspired by God. And even if it is inspired by God, it's not necessarily supremely authoritative (as most Protestants have tended to believe), it's certainly not absolutely, unequivocally, irrefutably true. It's useful! Useful isn't bad. But if you want a high view of scripture, you're going to have to find it somewhere other than here.

Now what scripture are we talking about? For starters, the passage I read from Isaiah. That's scripture, and it's useful – for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. When is the last time you preached, or heard someone else preach, on it?

The reference in Timothy is not to anything in what we now call the New Testament. It is not a claim about the authority of the New Testament. It's basically a claim about what biblical scholars now call the Septuagint – the Greek translation of those scriptures that were integral to the faith of the Israelites and the Jews, and which we now know basically as the Old Testament.

Today, in academic contexts, those writings are typically called the Hebrew scriptures, or the Hebrew Bible, inasmuch as the texts were mostly originally written in Hebrew and were produced by the Hebrew people and their descendants, the Jews. From a Christian perspective, this has never made a whole lot of sense to me, however. Does that mean we should call the scriptures of the New Testament the Greek scriptures, since they were originally written in Greek? Or the Christian scriptures, as they often are, because they were produced by the Christians? The problem with these sorts of denotations of the scriptures is that they obscure the fact that for Christians the writings of both the Old and the New Testaments are scripture. The Old Testament is Christian scripture just as much as the New.

This is a pet peeve of mine that I don't want to spend a lot of time on, but if the terminology of Old and New Testaments no longer seems appropriate, perhaps we should substitute the

terminology of First and Second Testaments. My basic point is that we need to do something to reclaim the so-called Old Testament as scripture for the Christian church. At one point in the early history of Christianity, it was the only scripture – and today, it is scripture that belongs on an equal footing with that we call the New Testament.

Now, I'm glad II Timothy doesn't say that all scripture is infallible or inerrant. There is a lot of stuff in the Old Testament that I don't like, and I don't think we should take to heart. The same goes for some stuff in the New Testament. And the fact is, we've often let ourselves off the hook of the Old Testament because there are elements like the Levitical code that just don't seem very ennobling or sublime – like stoning the rebellious son, or treating people as unclean when they are having bodily discharges of one sort or another. And God is often portrayed as an arbitrary despot, jealous, angry, vengeful, and so on. One can also find places in the New Testament, most notably in the Book of Revelation, where God is also portrayed in this way.

There is good reason why Christians, at least when they know what they are talking about, insist that the Word of God is not scripture, but the incarnate Word, Jesus. Certainly in Reformed theology, at least, Jesus becomes the norm for interpreting scripture. So if there is stuff in either the Old or the New – or the First or the Second – Testament that is clearly at odds with what we know from the teaching, ministry, and life of Jesus, then it doesn't have the same authority for us. I know the whole question of authority for Christian thought is a bit more complex than this, and we don't have time for all the complexities this morning, so I ask your indulgence for any over-simplifications.

Basically, I'm saying that Jesus is the plumb-line, the standard by which we measure all the rest of scripture, and that "all the rest" includes the First (or Old) Testament no less than the Second (or New) Testament.

But if we've got Jesus, why do we need anything else? In particular, why do we need the First Testament?

For one thing, it was Jesus' scripture! Remember Luke 4, where Jesus rises to read in the synagogue on the Sabbath? And he reads from Isaiah. So if it was useful for Jesus, maybe it would be useful for us! If it was authoritative for him in some way, maybe it should be authoritative for us in some way. If Jesus is our norm, then one of the key components of that norm is the use of the scriptures of the First, or Old, Testament.

For another thing, we need the scriptures of the First Testament because they express the faith of a people of God, and speak to a people of God, under circumstances quite different from those that prevailed in first century Palestine when Jesus came on the scene and the movement that became Christianity arose.

The message of Jesus and the Second, or New, Testament clearly has to be understood in its own social and historical and religious context (although that hardly means that it is limited in its

application to that context). The Second, or New, Testament expresses the faith of, and speaks to, a people who are a distinct minority. Those who live in Palestine are occupied and oppressed. They are subjects of an Empire that has invaded and occupied their land, that taxes them harshly and rules through surrogate puppet leaders, that suppresses their efforts to govern themselves and puts down any rebellions, and that crucifies anyone who appears to pose much of a threat to public order and the authority of those who rule on behalf of the Empire. Jesus wasn't crucified because he said, "Consider the lilies in the field, how they grow!" He was crucified because he posed a threat to the establishment. The formal charge against him was essentially that of being a traitor: "The King of the Jews!"

The central theme of Jesus' preaching, if the Gospels are true, was the coming kingdom of God. The very first thing that Jesus says in the Gospel of Mark, probably the earliest Gospel, is this: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near (1:15)." This message would hardly be music to Caesar's ear, or Herod's, or Pilate's. Not if the kingdom has anything to do with what happens on the ground, in this life, as a matter of our daily existence. The prayer we have all been taught as coming from Jesus, the one we call the Lord's Prayer, is most centrally a prayer for God's kingdom to come, "*on earth*, as it is in heaven." Caesar had no tolerance for competition, and neither did Caesar's minions, those who profited from the status quo by holding positions of power and influence, whether as religious or political leaders. Unfortunately, a number of people paid attention to Jesus, and that got him into deep trouble.

The Christian movement continued to be a minority movement for some three centuries or more. During the early years, it was also at times severely persecuted. Christians held varying views on how to relate to the State, or Empire, and when they got in trouble it was mostly because they insisted that their ultimate loyalty belonged to God, not Caesar. Basically, with respect to the governing authorities, Paul's advice was to be exemplary citizens, insofar as conscience allowed. Appearances mattered. One should avoid giving undue offense.

What I'm trying to highlight here is the constraining context in which Jesus and the Christians of the New Testament period had to find their way. We do not have examples or teaching in the New Testament about how Christians should act when they are not in the minority. We don't have examples of how they should relate to the State, or engage in public life, when they hold the reigns of power and responsibility. We don't have examples of the struggles in which Christians must engage when they are not the subjects of an oppressive and occupying Empire, but rather the citizens of such an Empire.

What we have in major portions of the First, or Old, Testament, on the other hand, are texts that emerge from, and address, a people who see themselves as being responsible for their own political destiny. From the period of the Exodus till the period of the Exile, several hundred years, the people of Israel were not occupied by a foreign power. During much of that time they were engaged in territorial conflicts, so life was not always peaceful or secure, but they had their own leaders, their own rulers, and – with the establishment of the monarchy under Saul and David – their own kingdom – later two kingdoms.

So what we get in major parts of the First, or Old, Testament are elements of a social ethic, an ethic of society, an ethic of social justice, an ethic about how people are to govern their life together, in keeping with God's purposes for humankind. Early Christians were pacifist, didn't hold public office, had little say in establishing laws or conducting public affairs. But the people of Israel – a rather different story. They had to think about what was right and good in their life together, because they were responsible. And they were responsible, because they possessed some degree of what we would today call self-governance or self-determination. In short, when it comes to shaping our life together today, in this time and place, the First Testament may have more to tell us than the Second.

We are citizens of an Empire. In other parts of the world, it is an occupying power. We can vote. We can elect representatives who will raise our taxes or lower them, who will spend public funds in this way or that, who will make laws favoring this group or that, who will lead us into war or work for peace, who will steward our resources or plunder them, who will enrich our life together or enrich themselves and their interest groups. We can also organize outside of the formal political structures to express ourselves and try to make a difference, whether through our voices or our actions or our service. How shall we be guided? What does justice look like? What would God's *kingdom* – or *commonwealth*, since we don't have kings anymore, and the idea of commonwealth accents the fact that we are all in this together – what would this commonwealth of God look like?

I have found that the scriptures, in particular the scriptures of the First Testament, are enormously useful in exploring this sort of question! And, those of you who are preachers, if you are not making use of those scriptures to inform and teach, reprove and correct, train and equip the members of your congregation for engagement in public life, then you are seriously slighting the commonwealth of God.

A month ago my wife and I were at Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian Conference Center in northern New Mexico. It's one of the most beautiful spots on the earth, with better weather than southern Indiana. If you've never been, you really ought to go.

At Ghost Ranch I participated in a seminar led by a couple of Presbyterian scholars and one who is Episcopalian but whose wife was a Presbyterian minister. In the seminar we were introduced to the statement adopted by our Church at the General Assembly two years ago, "A Social Creed for the 21st Century." It takes its name from the first Social Creed, adopted by the Federal Council of Churches one hundred years earlier, in 1908. The new Social Creed spells out what people who have thought about such matters believe the commonwealth of God would look like in our day and time. I commend it to you, and to your congregations, and to the ministry that we share. It is not scripture, but it is also *useful* for helping us to envision what God might have in store for a faithful people. AMEN.